The Big-Town Round Up

by

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FOREWORD

The driver of the big car throttled down. Since he had swung away from the dusty road to follow a wagon track across the desert, the speedometer had registered many miles. His eyes searched the ground in front to see whether the track led up the brow of the hill or dipped into the sandy wash.

On the breeze there floated to him the faint, insistent bawl of thirsty cattle. The car leaped forward again, climbed the hill, and closed in upon a remuda of horses watched by two wranglers.

The chauffeur stopped the machine and shouted a question at the nearest rider, who swung his mount and cantered up. He was a lean, tanned youth in overalls, jumper, wide sombrero, high-heeled boots, and shiny leather chaps. A girl in the tonneau appraised with quick, eager eyes this horseman of the plains. Perhaps she found him less picturesque than she had hoped. He was not there for moving-picture purposes. Nothing on horse or man held its place for any reason except utility.

"Where's the round up?" asked the driver.

The coffee-brown youth gave a little lift of his head to the right. He was apparently a man of few words.

The car moved forward to the edge of the mesa and dropped into the valley. The girl in the back seat gave a little scream of delight. Here at last was the West she had read about in books and seen on the screen.

This was Cattleland's hour of hours. The parada grounds were occupied by two circles of cattle, each fenced by eight or ten horsemen. The nearer one was the beef herd, beyond this—and closer to the mouth of the canyon from which they had all recently been driven—was a mass of closely packed cows and calves.

Several men were busy branding and marking the calves dragged to them from the herd by the horsemen who were roping the frightened little blatters.

With a movement of her wrist the girl opened the door and stepped down from the car.

A man sitting beside the chauffeur turned in his seat. "You'd better stay where you are, honey." He had an idea that this was not exactly the scene a girl of seventeen ought to see at close range.

"I want to get the kinks out of my muscles, Dad," the girl called back. "I'll not go far."

She walked along a ridge that ran from the mesa into the valley like an outstretched tongue. There was a touch of unstudied jauntiness in the way the tips of her golden curls escaped from beneath the little brown toque she wore. A young man guarding the beef herd watched her curiously. Something in the poise of the light, boyish figure struck a spark from his imagination.

As she stood on the spit of the ridge, a slim, light figure silhouetted against the skyline, the young man guarding the beef herd called something to her that was lost in the bawling of the cattle. From the motion of his hand she knew that he was telling her to get back to the car. But the girl saw no reason for obeying the orders of a range-rider she had never seen before and never expected to see again. Nobody had ever told her that a rider is fairly safe among the wildest hill cattle, but a man on foot is liable to attack at any time when a herd is excited.

A shout of warning startled her. Above the bellowing of the herd she heard another yell.

"Hi-yi-ya-a!"

A red-eyed steer, tail up, was crashing through the small brush toward the branders. There was a wild scurry for safety. The men dropped iron and ropes and fled to their saddles. Deflected by pursuers, the animal turned. By chance it thundered straight for the girl on the sand spit.

She stood paralyzed for a moment. Out of the gathering darkness a voice came to her sharp and clear. "Don't move!" It rang so vibrant with crisp command that the girl, poised for flight, stood still and waited in white terror while the huge steer lumbered toward her.

A cow pony, wheeled as on a dollar, jumped to an instant gallop. The man riding it was the one who had warned her back to the car. Horse and ladino pounded over the ground toward her. Each stride brought them closer to each other as they converged toward the sand spit. It came to her with a gust of panicky despair that they would collide on the very spot where she stood. Yet she did not run.

The rider, lifting his bronco forward at full speed, won by a fraction of a second. He guided in such a way as to bring his horse between her and the steer. Without slackening his pace in the least as he swept past, the man stooped low, caught the girl beneath the armpits, and swung her in front of him to the back of the horse. The steer pounded past so close behind that one of its horns grazed the tail of the cow pony.

It was a superb piece of horsemanship, perfectly timed, as perfectly executed.

The girl lay breathless in the arms of the man, her heart beating against his, her face buried in his shoulder. She was dazed, half fainting from the reaction of her fear. The next she remembered clearly was being lowered into the arms of her father.

He held her tight, his face tortured with emotion. She was the very light of his soul, and she had shaved death by a hair's breadth. A miracle had saved her, but he would never forget the terror that had gripped him.

The girl snuggled closer to him, her arms round his neck.

A young man descended from the car, handsome, trim, and well got up. He had been tailored by the best man's outfitter in New York. Nobody on Broadway could order a dinner better than he. The latest dances he could do perfectly. He had the reputation of knowing exactly the best thing to say on every occasion. Now he proceeded to say it.

"Corking bit of riding—never saw better. I'll give you my hand on that, my man."

The cowpuncher found a bunch of manicured fingers in his rough, brown paw. He found something else, for after the pink hand had gone there

He Guided in Such a Way as to Bring His Horse Between Her and the Steer.

remained a fifty-dollar bill. He looked at it helplessly for a moment; then, beneath the brown outdoor tan, a flush of anger beat into his face. Without a word he leaned forward and pressed the note into the mouth of the bronco.

The buckskin knew its master for a very good friend. If he gave it something to eat—well, there was no harm in trying it once. The buckskin chewed placidly for a few seconds, decided that this was a practical joke, and ejected from its mouth a slimy green pulp that had recently been a treasury note.

The father stammered his thanks to the rescuer of the girl. "I don't know what I can ever do to let you know . . . I don't know how I can ever pay you for saving . . ."

"Forget it!" snapped the brown man curtly. He was an even-tempered youth, as genial and friendly as a half-grown pup, but just now the word "pay" irritated him as a red rag does a sulky bull.

"If there's anything at all I can do for you—"

"Not a thing."

The New Yorker felt that he was not expressing himself at all happily. What he wanted was to show this young fellow that he had put him under a lifelong obligation he could never hope to wipe out.

"If you ever come to New York—"

"I'm not liable to go there. I don't belong there any more than you do here. Better drift back to Tucson, stranger. Take a fool's advice and hit the trail for town pronto before you bump into more trouble."

The rider swung round his pony and cantered back to the beef herd.

He left behind him a much-annoyed clubman, a perplexed and distressed father, and a girl both hurt and indignant at his brusque rejection of her father's friendly advances. The episode of the fifty-dollar bill had taken place entirely under cover. The man who had given the note and the one who had refused to accept it were the only ones who knew of it. The girl saw only that this splendid horseman who had snatched her from under the very feet of the ladino had shown a boorish discourtesy. The savor had gone out of her adventure. Her heart was sick with disappointment and indignation.

CHAPTER I

A Street Twelve Miles Long.

"I like yore outfit," Red Hollister grumbled. "You're nice boys, and good to yore mothers—what few of you ain't wore their gray hairs to the grave with yore frolicsome ways. You know yore business and you got a good cook. But I'm darned if I like this thing of two meals a day, one at a quarter to twelve at night and the other a quarter past twelve, also and likewise at night."

Red's grumbling was a pretense. He would not have been anywhere else for twice the pay. This was what he lived for.

Johnnie Green, commonly known as "the Runt," helped himself to another flank steak. He was not much of a cow-hand, but when it came to eating Johnnie was always conscientiously on the job.

"These here New Yorkers must be awful hardy," he ventured, apropos of nothing. "Seems like they're night birds for fair. Never do go to bed, far as I can make out. They tramp the streets all day and dance at them cabby-rets all night. My feet would be all wore out."

Stace Wallis grinned. "So would my pocketbook. I've heard tell how a fellow can pay as high as four or five dollars for an eat at them places."

Clay Lindsay laughed. "You boys know a lot about New York, just about as much as I do. I've read that a guy can drop a hundred dollars a night in a cabaret if he has a friend or two along, and never make a ripple on Broadway."

"Well, I read there's a street there twelve miles long. If a fellow started at one end of that street with a thirst he'd sure be salivated before he reached the other end of it," Stace said with a grin.

"Wonder if a fellow could get a job there. They wouldn't be no use for a puncher, I reckon," Slim drawled.

"Betcha Clay could get a job all right," answered Johnnie Green promptly. "He'd be top hand anywhere, Clay would."

Johnnie was the lost dog of the B-in-a-Box ranch. It was his nature to follow somebody and lick his hand whenever it was permitted. The somebody he followed was Clay Lindsay. Johnnie was his slave, the echo of his opinions, the booster of his merits. He asked no greater happiness than to trail in the wake of his friend and get a kind word occasionally.

The Runt had chosen as his Admirable Crichton a most engaging youth. It never had been hard for any girl to look at Clay Lindsay. His suntanned good looks, the warmth of his gay smile, the poise and the easy stride of him, made Lindsay a marked man even in a country where men of splendid physique were no exception.

His eyes now were watching the leap of the fire glow. The talk of New York had carried him back to a night on the round-up three years before. He was thinking about a slim girl standing on a sand spit with a wild steer rushing toward her, of her warm, slender body lying in his arms for five immortal seconds, of her dark, shy eyes shining out of the dusk at him like live coals. He remembered—and it hurt him to recall it—how his wounded pride had lashed out in resentment of the patronage of these New Yorkers. The younger man had insulted him, but he knew in his heart now that the girl's father had meant nothing of the kind. Of course the girl had forgotten him long since.

"Question is, could you land a job in New York if you wanted one," explained Stace to the dreamer.

"If it's neck meat or nothin' a fellow can 'most always get somethin' to do," said Lindsay in the gentle voice he used. The vague impulses of many days crystallized suddenly into a resolution. "Anyhow I'm goin' to try. Soon as the rodeo is over I'm goin' to hit the trail for the big town."

"Tucson?" interpreted Johnnie dubiously.

"New York."

The bow-legged little puncher looked at his friend and gasped.

Clay flashed on him the warm smile that endeared him to all his friends. "I'm goin' to ride down Broadway and shoot up the town, Johnnie. Want to come along?"

CHAPTER II

Clay Appoints Himself Chaperon.

As he traveled east Clay began to slough the outward marks of his calling. He gave his spurs to Johnnie before he left the ranch. At Tucson he shed his chaps and left them in care of a friend at the Longhorn corral. The six-gun with which he had shot rattlesnakes he packed into his suitcase at El Paso. His wide-rimmed felt hat flew off while the head beneath it was stuck out of a window of the coach somewhere south of Denver. Before he passed under the Welcome arch in that city the silk kerchief had been removed from his brown neck and retired to the hip pocket which formerly held his forty-five.

The young cattleman began to flatter himself that nobody could now tell he was a wild man from the hills who had never been curried. He might have spared himself the illusion. The lightness of his stride, the breadth of the well-packed shoulders, the frankness of the steady eyes, all advertised him as a son of Arizona.

It was just before noon at one of the small plains towns east of Denver that a girl got on the train and was taken by the porter to a section back of Clay Lindsay. The man from Arizona noticed that she was refreshingly pretty in an unsophisticated way.

A little later he had a chance to confirm this judgment, for the dining-car manager seated her opposite him at a table for two. When Clay handed her the menu card she murmured "Thank you!" with a rush of color to her cheeks and looked helplessly at the list in her hand. Quite plainly she was taking her first long journey.

The cow puncher helped her fill the order card. She put herself entirely in his hands and was willing to eat whatever he suggested unbiased by preferences of her own.

She was a round, soft, little person with constant intimations of a childhood not long outgrown. During the course of lunch she confided that her name was Kitty Mason, that she was an orphan, and that she was on her way to New York to study at a school for moving-picture actresses.

"I sent my photograph and the manager wrote back that my face was one hundred per cent perfect for the movies," the girl explained. It was clear that she was expecting to be manufactured, into a film star in a week or two.

After they had finished eating, the range-rider turned in at the smoking compartment and enjoyed a cigar. He fell into casual talk with an army officer who had served in the Southwest, and it was three hours later when he returned to his own seat in the car.

A hard-faced man in a suit of checks more than a shade too loud was sitting in the section beside the girl from Brush. He was making talk in an assured, familiar way, and the girl was listening to him shyly and yet eagerly. The man was a variation of a type known to Lindsay. That type was the Arizona bad-man. If this expensively dressed fellow was not the eastern equivalent of the western gunman, Clay's experience was badly at fault.

Clay had already made friends with the Pullman conductor. He drifted to him now on the search for information.

"The hard-faced guy with the little girl?" he asked casually after the proffer of a cigar. "The one with the muscles bulging out all over him—who is he?"

"He comes by that tough mug honestly. That's Jerry Durand."

"The prize-fighter?"

"Yep. Used to be. He's a gang leader in New York now. Runs a gambling house of his own, I've heard. You can't prove it by me."

When Lindsay returned to his place he settled himself with a magazine in a seat where he could see Kitty and her new friend. The very vitality of the girl's young life was no doubt a temptation to this man. The soft, rounded throat line, the oval cheek's rich coloring so easily moved to ebb and flow, the carmine of the full red lips; every detail helped to confirm the impression of a sensuous young creature, innocent as a wild thing of the forests and as yet almost as unspiritual.

Durand took the girl in to dinner with him and they sat not far from Lindsay. Kitty was lost to any memory of those about her. She was flirting joyously with a sense of newly awakened powers. The man from Graham county, Arizona, felt uneasy in his mind. The girl was flushed with life. In a way she was celebrating her escape from the narrow horizon in which she had lived. In her unsophistication danger lay. For she was plainly easily influenced, and in the beat of her healthy young blood probably there was latent passion.

Kitty Was Lost to Any Memory of Those About Her.

They left the diner before Clay. He passed them later in the vestibule of the sleeper. They were looking out together on the moonlit plain through which the train was rushing. The arm of the man was stretched behind her to the railing and with the motion of the car the girl swayed back slightly against him.

Again Clay sought the smoking compartment and was led into talk by the officer. It was well past eleven when he rose, yawned, and announced, "I'm goin' to hit the hay."

Most of the berths were made up and it was with a little shock of surprise that his eyes fell on Kitty Mason and her new friend, the sleek black head of the man close to her fair curls, his steady eyes holding her like a charmed bird while his caressing voice wove the fairy tale of New York to which she yielded herself in strange delight.

"Don't you-all want yo' berth made up, lady?"

It was the impatient porter who interrupted them. The girl sprang up tremulously to accept.

"Oh, please. Is it late?" Her glance swept down the car and took in the fact that her section alone was not made up. "I didn't know—why, what time is it?"

"Most twelve, ma'am," replied the aggrieved porter severely.

She flashed a look of reproach at her companion and blushed again as she fled with her bag to the ladies' dressing room.

The train was rolling through the cornfields of the Middle West when the Arizonan awoke. He was up early, but not long before Kitty Mason, who was joined at once by Durand.

"Shucks! Nothin' to it a-tall," the range-rider assured himself. "That li'l' girl must have the number of this guy. She's flirtin' with him to beat three of a kind, but I'll bet a dogie she knows right where she's at."

Clay did not in the least believe his own argument. If he had come from a city he would have dismissed the matter as none of his business. But he came from the clean Southwest where every straight girl is under the protection of every decent man. If she was in danger because of her innocence it was up to him to look after her. There was no more competent man in Graham county than Clay Lindsay, but he recognized that this was a delicate affair in which he must move warily.

On his way to the diner at noon the range-rider passed her again. She was alone for the moment and as she leaned back her soft round throat showed a beating pulse. Her cheeks were burning and her starry eyes were looking into the future with a happy smile.

"You pore little maverick," the man commented silently.

The two had the table opposite him. As the wheels raced over a culvert to the comparative quiet of the ballasted track beyond, the words of the man reached Clay.

". . . and we'll have all day to see the city, Kid."

Kitty shook her head. There was hesitation in her manner, and the man was quick to make the most of it. "And it won't cost you a cent, girlie," he added.

But the long lashes of the girl lifted and her baby-blue eyes met his with shy reproach. "I don't think I ought," she breathed, color sweeping her face in a vivid flame.

"You should worry," he scoffed.

Lindsay knew the girl was weakening. She was no match for this big, dominant, two-fisted man.

The jaw of the cow puncher set. This child was not fair game for a man like Durand. When Clay rose to leave the diner he knew that he meant to sit in and take a hand.

The train was creeping through the thickly settled quarter where the poorer people are herded when Clay touched Durand on the shoulder.

"Like to see you a moment in the vestibule," he said in his gentle voice.

The eyes of the two men met and the gambler knew at once that this man and he were destined to be enemies.

No man had ever said that Jerry Durand was not game. He rose promptly and followed the westerner from the car, swinging along with the light, catlike tread acquired by many pugilists.

The floor of the vestibule had been raised and the outer door of the car opened. Durand found time to wonder why.

The cowpuncher turned on him with an abrupt question. "Can you swim?"

The eyes of the ward boss narrowed. "What's that to you?" he demanded truculently.

"Nothin' to me, but a good deal to you. I'm aimin' to drop you in the river when we cross."

"Is that so?" snarled Durand. "You're quite a joker, ain't you? Well, suit me. But let's get this clear so we'll know where we're at. What's ailin' you, rube?"

"I don't like the color of yore hair or the cut of yore clothes," drawled Lindsay. "You've got a sure-enough bad eye, and I'm tired of travelin' in yore company. Let's get off, me or you one."

In the slitted eyes of the Bowery graduate there was no heat at all. They were bleak as a heavy winter morn. "Suits me fine. You'll not travel with me much farther. Here's where you beat the place."

The professional lashed out suddenly with his left. But Clay was not at the receiving end of the blow. Always quick as lightning, he had ducked and clinched. His steel-muscled arms tightened about the waist of the other. A short-arm jolt to the cheek he disregarded.

Before Durand had set himself to meet the plunge he found himself flying through space. The gambler caught at the rail, missed it, landed on the cinders beside the roadbed, was flung instantly from his feet, and rolled over and over down an incline to a muddy gully.

Clay, hanging to the brass railing, leaned out and looked back. Durand had staggered to his feet, plastered with mud from head to knees, and was shaking furiously a fist at him. The face of the man was venomous with rage.

The cowpuncher waved a debonair hand and mounted the steps again. The porter was standing in the vestibule looking at him with amazement.

"You throwed a man off'n this train, mistah," he charged.

"So I did," admitted Clay, and to save his life he could not keep from smiling.

The porter sputtered. This beat anything in his previous experience. "But—but—it ain't allowed to open up the cah. Was you-all havin' trouble?"

"No trouble a-tall. He bet me a cigar I couldn't put him off."

Clay palmed a dollar and handed it to the porter as he passed into the car. The eyes of that outraged official rolled after him. The book of rules did not say anything about wrestling matches in the vestibule. Besides, it happened that Durand had called him down sharply not an hour before. He decided to brush off his passengers and forget what he had seen.

Clay stopped in front of Kitty and said he hoped she would have no trouble making her transfer in the city. The girl was no fool. She had sensed the antagonism that had flared up between them in that moment when they had faced each other five minutes before.

"Where's Mr. Durand?" she asked.

"He got off."

"But the train hasn't stopped."

"It's just crawlin' along, and he was in a hurry."

Her gaze rested upon an angry bruise on his cheek. It had not been there when last she saw him.

"I don't understand it," she murmured, half to herself. "Why would he get off before we reached the depot?"

She was full of suspicions, and the bruise on the westerner's cheek did not tend to allay them. They were still unsatisfied when the porter took her to the end of the car to brush her clothes.

The discretion of that young man had its limits. While he brushed the girl he told her rapidly what he had seen in the vestibule.

"Was he hurt?" she asked breathlessly.

"No'm. I looked out and seen him standin' beside the track jes' a-cussin' a blue streak. He's a sho-'nough bad actor, that Jerry Durand."

Kitty marched straight to her section. The eyes of the girl flashed anger.

"Please leave my seat, sir," she told Clay.

The Arizonan rose at once. He knew that she knew. "I was intendin' to help you off with yore grips," he said.

She flamed into passionate resentment of his interference. "I'll attend to them. I can look out for myself, sir."

With that she turned her back on him.

CHAPTER III

The Big Town.

When Clay stepped from the station at the Thirty-fourth Street entrance New York burst upon him with what seemed almost a threat. He could hear the roar of it like a river rushing down a canyon. Clay had faced a cattle stampede. He had ridden out a blizzard hunched up with the drifting herd. He had lived rough all his young and joyous life. But for a moment he felt a chill drench at his heart that was almost dread. He did not know a soul in this vast populace. He was alone among seven or eight million crazy human beings.

He had checked his suitcase to be free to look about. He had no destination and was in no hurry. All the day was before him, all of many days. He drifted down the street and across to Sixth avenue.

Chance swept him up Sixth to Herald square. He was caught in the river of humanity that races up Broadway. He wondered where all this rush of people was going. What crazy impulses sent them surging to and fro? And the girls—Clay surrendered to them at discretion. He had not supposed there were so many pretty, well-dressed girls in the world.

"First off I'm goin' to get me a real city suit of clothes," he promised himself. "This here wrinkled outfit is some too woolly for the big town. It's a good suit yet—'most as good as when I bought it at the Boston store in Tucson three years ago. But I reckon I'll save it to go home in."

He stopped in front of a store above which was the legend "I. Bernstein, Men's Garments." A small man with sharp little eyes and well-defined nose was standing in the doorway.

"Might You Would Want a Good Suit of Quality Clothes, My Friendt?" He Suggested.

"Might you would want a good suit of quality clothes, my friendt," he suggested.

"You've pegged me right," agreed the westerner with his ready smile. "Lead me to it."

TO BE CONTINUED